The United States Reference Manual

The Electric Light Golden Jubilee "Edison" Issues

Scott 654

Scott 655

Scott 656

The "Electric Light Jubilee" stamp was issued during 1929 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the invention of the first practical incandescent lamp on October 21, 1879, but since most people find it easier to identify with a person than with a light bulb, the stamp became known as the "Edison" stamp for the inventor, Thomas Alva Edison.

As far as collectors are concerned, "the stamp" actually is three stamps:

Scott 654, a flat plate press printing issued June 5, 1929;

Scott 655, a rotary press sheet stamp issued June 11, 1929;

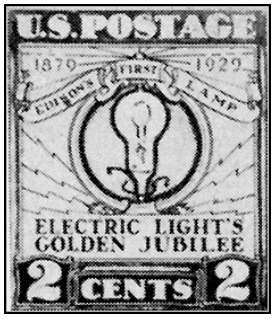
Scott 656, a rotary press coil stamp issued June 11, 1929.

At a time when many adults could remember life without electric lights, the widespread observance of Light's Golden Jubilee was organized by a general committee composed of leaders of practically every walk of life in America, with President Herbert Hoover as honorary chairman. Suggestions for the stamp design were largely in the hands of J. F. Quinlan, Executive Secretary for the organization.

The first suggestions were for a portrait of Edison, but this would have gone against a Post Office Department policy that forbade the use of a piceture of a living person on stamps, a policy that even Lindbergh's solo Transatlantic flight could not change. Instead, the subject gradually turned to the invention itself. Instead, Edison became only the second living American to see his name printed on a United States commemorative, the first being Lindbergh on the 1927 airmail stamp (Sc. C10) that pictures the *Spirit of St. Louis*.

The first design suggested to the department was a picture of the house Edison was born in, flanked by a replica of Edison's original filament lamp, or bulb, and a then-modern 1929-era bulb.

This would have required a horizontal, special delivery size stamp, but what was sought was the small, conventional size stamp of the period, so the designs prepared at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) consisted of drawings of Edison's original lamp, with rays coming from the lamp. Shown to the right is a design that was rejected.



The design that was accepted was created by Alvin R. Meissner of the BEP. The master die engraving was done by J. C. Benzing, also of the Bureau of Engraving & Printing.

The plan called for printing all the sheet stamps on the flat plate press and the coils on the rotary press. However, the anticipated demand was such that the faster rotary presses were called into service for additional sheet stamps. The demand came mostly from large manufacturers of electrical supplies, who planned on using these stamps on their mail as advertising for years to come. This included General Electric, which identified closely with Edison and the light bulb. Further demonstrating the connection, the stamp was not issued on the October 21 anniversary date, but during the week of the National Electric Light Convention in nearby Atlantic City, N.J.

The coil stamp also was produced in anticipation of volume mailings, and became the first U.S. commemorative to be issued in coil form. There was some speculation that the stamp also would be issued imperforate, to accommodate mailers who did their own private perforating, but this was never the intent of the Post Office Department. Instead, the coil stamps were issued on June 11 in rolls of 500 and 1,000, with the gum side facing the core, as is customary. Then, on September 29, it was issued in coils of 3,000 with the gum facing outward, for use in stamp affixing machines.

The flat plate stamps were printed in sheets of four hundred subjects each, then cut into panes of 100 along horizontal and vertical guide lines. There were eight plate numbers to each full sheet; after cutting, this resulted in two on each pane, in the top (photo) or bottom outer margin and the side margin.

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